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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000055

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ESCALATING VIOLENCE SHIFTS TO  
TRINCOMALEE

REF: A. USDAO COLOMBO IRR 6816003406

[1](#)B. 2005 COLOMBO 2157

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle. For reasons 1.4 (B & D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The week of January 2 was quiet in the Jaffna peninsula where several attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Belam (LTTE) in the last 30 days had claimed the lives of dozens of security forces (Ref B). However, the eastern district of Trincomalee became the new nexus of violence, following the murder of five Tamil students on January 2 and the sinking of a Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) patrol boat on January 7 by the LTTE. The Government is probing allegations that members of the police Special Task Force (STF) killed the students. The Embassy will continue to monitor the safety and security of USAID OTI staff and Amcits in Trincomalee and elsewhere in the east closely. END SUMMARY.

QUIET IN THE NORTH, EXPLOSIONS IN THE EAST  
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[1](#)2. (C) The embattled Jaffna peninsula in the north enjoyed a respite during the week of January 2 following a series of lethal claymore attacks against the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) (Ref B). While there were occasional attacks against Army outposts, the week saw no repeats of the well-planned bombings and mass civilian protests of the previous month.

[1](#)3. (C) While the north was comparatively quiet, however, in the eastern district of Trincomalee, five out of a group of seven Tamil students were killed the night of January 2. Local Tamil groups and the LTTE have accused police Special Task Force (STF) commandos in Trincomalee of throwing a grenade at, assaulting, then shooting the group of seven students who had been sitting beside the harbor road. One of the surviving students told the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission (HRC) that following the grenade, several uniformed men pulled up in a van, jumped out and proceeded to beat the students. Five of the students were then reportedly forced to lie face down and shot in the back of the head. The surviving students, having been more grievously injured by the grenade, according to the student's account, were left for dead. Arthur Tveiten, District Head of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), confirmed that the bodies showed little injury from grenade shrapnel but instead displayed evidence of severe beating in addition to gunshot wounds. He added that the physical evidence supported the surviving student's account that the victims had been forced to lie face down when shot. According to the SLMM, none of the victims had apparent ties to the LTTE; instead, two of the youths were university students and sons of a local lawyer and physician.

[1](#)4. (C) Following the five deaths, SLA spokesmen claimed that the students had inadvertently blown themselves up with two hand grenades while waiting to launch an attack on security forces. This account was later amended to suggest the students were victims of a grenade attack by unknown perpetrators. Only after the Judicial Medical Officer's report on the incident, which found that two of the five had died of gunshot wounds, did the military spokesman admit that some bodies had been found with gunshot wounds. On January 4 the Ministry of Defense announced a "full scale probe" of the incident would be held. Meanwhile, at the behest of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, police Deputy Inspector General Asoka Wijetilleke was detailed to Trincomalee to conduct his own investigation.

THREATS AND SYMPATHY  
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[1](#)5. (C) Trincomalee has been under a six-day (January 3-8) hartal (general shutdown) to protest the students' deaths. Groups of unarmed Tamil youths roamed the streets on January 3 exhorting people to visit the dead in the hospital and calling on shops and offices, including the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) office (which was in the process of closing), to close. When told that the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) was in the process of closing, the group moved on. Some groups demolished unmanned guard posts, tearing off roofs and scattering sandbags. Hand bills and fliers could be found around various NGO offices reading, "We know who you are working behind locked doors. We see you. Show your respect or suffer the consequences." Local

staff remained at home during the January hartal. According to OTI personnel, some banks and government offices and most NGO and INGO offices were open on January 9. The OTI office will re-open on January 10.

#### WHO IS IN CONTROL

16. (C) Colombo-based press reported on January 8 that 24 STF commandos under the command of a chief inspector (equivalent to an Army captain) had been dispatched to Trincomalee before the January 2 incident with instructions to come down hard on all terrorist elements. These orders reportedly came from special Defense Ministry advisor H.N.G.B. Kotakadeniya, a retired police Deputy Inspector General with impeccable credentials as a Sinhala hardliner. According to the press, Kotakadeniya had not informed his superiors or the local military commanders of the move. RSO police contacts confirmed that the STF unit had indeed been transferred to Trincomalee; we have been unable to confirm this, however, with the Ministry of Defense. Kotakadeniya's reputation only adds to local suspicion of STF involvement. (See Septel in which President Rajapaksa told the Ambassador that the STF would be pulled out of Trincomalee.)

#### REMEMBER THE MAINE

17. (C) On January 7 at approximately 0100 a Dvora class Fast Attack Craft conducting a routine patrol off Trincomalee harbor headlands was struck by an apparent LTTE suicide boat. The 75' Israeli-made gunboat quickly sank. Local fishermen recovered two survivors, but two officers and 11 sailors remain lost at sea. According to military authorities, several LTTE craft had been hiding among fishing boats, and the military claims to have intercepted LTTE transmissions authorizing the attack (Ref A). On January 9 the SLN announced a ban on fishing in the inner harbor.

18. (C) S. Elilan, LTTE political head for Trincomalee district, denied LTTE responsibility for the attack to the SLMM. Rather, Elilan claimed instead it was a plot by the GSL to impose a fishing ban and disrupt the livelihoods of Tamil fisherfolk in the area. (Note: In 1994 the LTTE unilaterally broke the cease-fire by blowing up two SLN vessels in Trincomalee harbor). SLMM spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir told poloff that the SLMM found Elilan's denials ludicrous, and confirmed that the SLMM would continue maritime patrolling off Sri Lanka's eastern coast. Olafsdottir added that the SLMM is considering a statement that they held the LTTE in abrogation of the cease-fire agreement. However, such discussion would be postponed until after Norwegian envoy Erik Solhiem's January 23-26 visit.

#### COMMENT

19. (C) The LTTE has attempted to claim that land attacks in December against the security forces were spontaneous outpourings of popular frustration against GSL "oppression"; it will be somewhat harder for the Tigers to claim that disgruntled Tamil fishermen sank the Navy patrol boat. The Army and Navy have generally shown great forbearance thus far in the face of escalating violence. While the allegation against the STF is disturbing, the speed with which the GSL seems to be addressing this issue is encouraging. We will continue to monitor the safety and security of USAID OTI staff and the (small) Amciti community in Trincomalee and elsewhere closely.

#### LUNSTEAD